

Thy Kingdom Come, O Lord (part 2)

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Last week we talked a bit on the kingdom. What does the kingdom look like? How do we get there? How do we get through dark times to build the kingdom? And we looked at that because we had two different visions to consider. In the scriptures last week, we had Isaiah's vision of Utopia, or a perfect peaceful existence, and then we had Jesus in Luke telling us of dark times ahead; the Temple destroyed and war and persecution and more coming in the future. So how do we get to the kingdom?

We ask that question because it is a goal of all Christ-followers. Get to the kingdom. Build the kingdom. Even in the Lord's Prayer that we pray every Sunday, we pray "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Getting to the kingdom and building the kingdom is a prime focus in the mission of the Church. We heard last week how we get to the kingdom by working through the darkness, for the kingdom, being builders of the kingdom and not just wanderers eventually delivered to the kingdom.

Today we hear more about this kingdom. Every kingdom has a king to rule and watch over it. So today we look at the "royalty" on the throne of this kingdom we are called to have a hand in building. Who is this King, this Christ, who is meant to reign over the Church and oversee the kingdom construction, here and now in today's world?

We get two different pictures of this king. In the Colossians passage, we heard read, we have Paul expounding on the authority of Jesus the Christ. God placed Jesus above all things, above all creation, above all authorities, above all kings and princes and their nations. Then in Luke... we have quite a different picture. In Luke's telling of the crucifixion, we see Jesus mocked on a cross, the only items present to point to his kingship are a crown of thorns on his head and a sign hung above his head that read, "This is the king of the Jews." How do we balance these two pictures of this Jesus king?

In Colossians, before we get to that part of Paul's letter where he starts praising Jesus, telling us how Jesus has all authority, given to him by God, over all creation, rulers, and principalities, Paul tells us about the hope we have in Christ. In the first chapter of his letter, Paul is encouraging the faith community in Colossae to continue following the way of Christ. Paul, who himself is imprisoned in Rome, is celebrating how the gospel is moving amongst the people and the work of love is being done. He writes in verses 3-6...

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people— ⁵the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel ⁶that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace.

In Colossae, the gospel has brought hope and a life-giving energy to those who have believed the truth of the message of Christ. It is creating something profound amongst the people; something that binds them together. Together they are creating a community that looks to and works toward a better time.

Paul goes on in verses 9-14.

⁹For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, ¹⁰so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, ¹²and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. ¹³For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

The message is there. In God is knowledge. In God is strength. In God is endurance and patience. In God is redemption and salvation from the darkness; forgiveness and restoration to a right relationship where we are heirs of the kingdom. All this through this one Jesus, whom God calls the Son and whom we call Christ. Before Paul goes into his, “Jesus is so great” speech, this is what it’s all about. It’s about hope. Paul starts with hope. And hope starts with Jesus.

It's because of this hope in Jesus, that the Colossians are living in faith and “bearing fruit in every good work” as Paul put it. But let me ask you this... What is hope to you? Seriously, what is hope to you?

I suppose there’s more than one way we can answer that question. Hope is a feeling. It’s a positive emotion that lifts us up. We are hopeful for the sun to shine and bring us warmth. We are hopeful that winter will not be too cold or bring us another ice storm. It’s not fun to go out and have to scrape our windshields. And despite living in the Midwest for most of my life, I still haven’t learned to check the car half an hour before I need to be in the car, because I am hopeful (foolishly so) that there is no frost on my windshield. Hope is an emotion; sometimes a positive one and sometimes a foolish one, but still an emotion.

Hope is more than emotion though. Hope is a choice. Hope is something we do when we look at our various situations and say, “This good thing is what we want for our future.” It’s the choice to make it work as we’re able, and make it better when we can. Hope in that choice goes beyond optimism into resolution. When a child is born, hope can sound like, “I will do everything I can to make sure this child doesn’t have as hard a life as I did.” When we’re struggling financially, hope can sound like, “We’ll figure out a way and we’ll get through it together.” When we’re struggling with evils of the world in whatever forms they present themselves, hope can sound like, “feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, visit the prisoner and the sick, build the kingdom.”

Hope as choice and resolution in times of darkness is deciding to believe this is not all there is. In times of stress, it’s deciding to believe there will come a relief. In times of pain, it’s deciding to believe there will come healing. In times of death and loss it’s deciding there will come resurrection.

Hope is also action. Hope is not just deciding, resolving, and believing in what is good and better in the future. Hope is moving toward the future and the outcome we seek. This is what Paul is saying to the Colossians. You’ve come to believe in this Jesus. You’ve been redeemed. Now you live in this life with this Jesus as Lord. You live and work in this hope and this hope is evidenced in the way you care for one another and in the way the Church is growing around the known world.

This is what Paul is saying with all the communities he is writing to in all his letters. He’s encouraging all these different communities where the seed of the gospel has taken root. He’s

encouraging these churches in all the fruit-bearing good work the Holy Spirit is inspiring in them. They are working together, supporting each other, creating little kingdoms of God in the villages and towns and cities where they are. That's what the local church is suppose to be in Paul's day and in any age. The local church is a small neighborhood of the kingdom of God. This is how hope is manifest in the kingdom. It is the love of God, as exemplified by Jesus Christ, made tangible in the everyday.

That right there is a powerful message of loyalty and citizenship in the kingdom of God. It's being so hopeful in the person of Jesus Christ that our everyday is spent building the kingdom. Not because Jesus commanded it, but because we feel Jesus in it with us.

But then there's Luke...

We come today and we say, "Christ is King!" Did you know that phrase is an end time proclamation? "Christ is King," means Christ is victorious. Christ sits on the throne. The work is done and the battle won. We have the book and we've read the ending. Christ reigns!

But how does Christ reign? Because there are two very different pictures of Christ in the world; even in the Church. There is Christ the All-powerful and there is Christ the redeemer.

If we take a look over at the side stage, we've got our visual of what the throne of Christ might look like. 'Cause, ya know, a king needs a throne to sit on. The throne is the universally (or nearly universally) accepted seat of authority for any kingdom. All honor and glory and lip service for long life has been offered to king after king throughout history.



Even in Revelation 4:9-11, John in a vision, was witness to heavenly worship where 24 crowned elders bow down, prostrating themselves and casting their crowns before the One who sits on the throne as they sang praises of glory, honor, and power to God the creator of all things. Which vision of a king are they worshipping? The king of power and might, or the king of grace and merciful compassion?

On our throne here, we've set two crowns, one to either side. Do we follow the Christ who wears a bejeweled crown of heavy gold? That crown is meant to stand for power and influence and wealth. It's the symbol of the Commander of armies and Lord over all the territory. The highest authority, much like Paul was saying as he wrote to the Colossians about Christ. I've tried that crown on. It hurts. I imagine a crown like that is a constant reminder of how heavy a burden and responsibility it is to be a king... when the authority of the crown is wielded with respect to that responsibility. But we've witnessed too often throughout history how easily a crown can become a status symbol and a power to be wielded at a whim.



If we look to the other side of the throne, we see a different crown; a more humble, maybe even humiliating crown. It's a symbol of sacrifice and the ultimate price paid for a people's freedom. In a way, it's a powerful message of God's loyalty and unconditional love for us. In another, it's an indictment of humanity that we would reject the love of God so violently.



So, do we follow this Christ, whose crown was a crown of thorns? Do we follow the Christ who sacrificed his life on a cross? Do we follow the Christ who hung there between two thieves, getting angry insults hurled at him from one side and a plea for mercy and forgiveness from the other?

That scene right there embodies how we approach Christ. Do we approach Christ demanding change? Do we approach Christ saying, "You're all powerful! Do something!" Or do we approach Christ saying, "Lord, Lord please... remember me when you come into your kingdom this day." Do we hear in faith, the words of Christ, as he answers back, "Truly, today, you will be with me in paradise."

Do we have faith in those words? Do we have this hope that Paul talks about in those words. Do we follow Christ in his teachings and his ways? What is it to follow Christ?

You know what? There was a way of thinking and believing in the early church, that in order to follow Christ, you would have to be willing to be martyred and not try to escape that martyrdom. There were droves of early believers who weren't necessarily looking for that claim to martyrdom, but they wouldn't refuse it. There's even recorded stories of Christians being brought into amphitheaters to face their death at the hands of gladiators, and the claws and horns and fangs of predatory beasts. Their martyrdom was carried out as a form of entertainment and spectacle.

One such story is the story of Perpetua who was martyred with two other Christian women, Felicity and Blandina. These three women professed Christianity and would not renounce their faith in Christ and make sacrifice to Roman deities. The response of the provincial governor was a sentence of torture and condemnation to the beasts. In Perpetua's case, she faced off against a bull who tossed her and cast her down. This caused her hair to come loose. And in all of the boldness of Christian faith she said, "Hold up. Let me fix my hair;" an important detail not because of vanity, but because for a woman to wear her hair unbound was a sign of mourning. With her hair coming undone, Perpetua wanted to be able to say, "I am not in mourning in the face of my death. I have absolute faith in Christ my Lord, and this is a moment of joy and triumph for me, that I can stand here and be in this place testifying to the hope I have in Christ even as I face my death... So, I'm gonna fix my hair."

It got to the point where if you ran away from martyrdom, you were considered a coward. I do have to ask the question, knowing that yes, we follow Christ and his teaching and we take on the duty of Christian love and hope and living into our faith... but how far do we take that?

How far was Christ willing to go? Christ went to the cross; a king willing to give his life for his people. In some instances (I won't deny it or refute it) following Christ does lead us to the ultimate mortal price. That has happened throughout history. But is it necessary? Is it necessary for all Christians everywhere to claim martyrdom, to move toward martyrdom, to want martyrdom? Is that following Christ the King? Is that being loyal to the call of Christ on our

lives? How far was Christ willing to go? Christ was willing to go to the cross. How far does Christ call us to go? As far as necessary as long as the kingdom is being built.

In this time when Christians were, in a way, getting in line for martyrdom, there was one bishop, bishop Cyprian of Carthage, in the third century who knew that the Roman guard was coming after him and he went into hiding. He was criticized for it and called a coward. There were followers of Jesus and other clergy who said he should have accepted martyrdom. That is what Christ had called him to do.

His response was, “No! Martyrdom is not what Christ called me to do in this moment. I cannot abandon my station for martyrdom. There needs to be a shepherd for the people. There needs to be someone to lead the Church. There needs to be someone to keep spreading that message of hope, those teachings of love. There needs to be someone to help bring the Church into the kingdom built with compassion. I can’t do that if I’m dead.”

How far are we called to go in following Christ?

Let’s change that question up a little bit. Let’s ask this instead. What does it mean to give your life for Christ? What does it mean that Jesus gave his life for us? A lot of times we hear that question and the automatic answer is, “Well, it means he was sacrificed on the cross. His life was an atonement for our sins and then Jesus rose three days later.”

Yes... but let’s think of that question more fully. What does it mean that Christ gave his life for us? Because life is not summarized in the moment of death. Life is something that you build and you live. Life is full of action and choices. Life is full of little moments that in some cases to us can seem insignificant, but in the grander scheme of things can be profound turning points.

What does it mean that Christ gave himself for us; gave his life for us? It means that Christ lived in such a way that his focus was always the redemption of God’s people, was always the healing of the pain and the hurt and the suffering that life brings us. His focus was always to fix the relationship between heaven and creation; between God and humanity. That might have culminated in the cross. But it was built through 33 years of living in faith and being one with God the Divine Parent.

So, going back to one of the earlier questions; How far do we go in following Jesus? We give our lives in faith, not to head toward martyrdom, but living in such a way that every choice, every movement, every action builds upon the one before it. Our lives are to be lived in faith, with the focus of being little Christs; being Christians to the world. We are to be the people who walk in the way of faith and hope and love. We are the people who live for the kingdom to be built.

What does that look like? Rather than give you a name of a missionary you may or may not have heard of (I’ve already used Ellyn Dubberly), I’m gonna throw out a name that you probably know... Jimmy Carter. Now, I don’t throw that name out to be political. I throw that name out because this is a man who lived his faith with compassion. He put that faith into everything. When he was in office of president, he pushed for universal healthcare with the belief that the people of The United States needed to be taken care of and it was the responsibility of those in authority to do so. Jimmy Carter is a man who created a charity focused on building homes and creating shelter. He is 98 years old and still building house with Habitat for Humanity. And he speaks on his faith and his relationship with Jesus Christ in a way that is filled with compassion and social responsibility. He speaks of Christ who wears the thorns, before he speaks of Christ who wears the crown.

That is how we live in faith. That is how we follow Christ. That is how we say Christ is King. We act. We build. We move forward in faith with every action upon the other to build the kingdom and say, "I do this in the name of the love of Christ." It goes so much further than thoughts and prayers, when thoughts and prayers are built up with action.

Action. How do you proclaim the love of Christ and the kingship of Christ here and now? With action. How do we say, "O Lord, Thy kingdom come"? We act. We move forward consciously, intentionally building on what the Church has done that is good and right; building on the choices that we make that point toward love and toward a time of Christ's reign, here and now.

One of the ways we can do that in this moment, here and now, is by reaffirming our faith. Please join me in this reaffirmation of faith:

**We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.**

**We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.**

**For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.**

**We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son
is worshiped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic* and apostolic church.
We acknowledge one baptism
for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.**